TITLE:

Re-Imagining Kerala’s Social Past: Caste Formation, Literary Myth-Making, and Historical Reality (14th–20th Century)

An Academic Study with Footnotes and Full Bibliography

Author:

ABSTRACT

This article critically reconstructs the history of caste formation in Kerala from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century, challenging long-standing narratives shaped by literary imagination, colonial misreadings, and caste-based identity politics. Particular attention is given to the influence of C. V. Raman Pillai’s nineteenth-century historical novels—especially *Marthanda Varma*—on the construction of a Nair martial identity, the misrepresentation of the Ettuveetil Madampimar, the erasure of Ezhava, Nadar, and other communities from Kerala’s military history, and the ideological role played by early reformers in recasting caste origins. Drawing on archival documents, palm-leaf records, the *Travancore State Manual*, Sangam literature, European travel writings, and modern historiography, this work argues that caste in Kerala was not a static system but a dynamic, politically engineered social order whose memory has often been overwritten by myth.

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION + SECTION I

1. Introduction

The history of caste formation in Kerala represents one of the most intricate social evolutions in South Asia. Unlike the varna-based frameworks of northern India, Kerala developed its own stratified order—shaped by land relations, Brahminical ritual dominance, matrilineal inheritance, temple economies, and the military fragmentation characteristic of Kerala's premodern principalities. Yet, the Kerala that appears in popular imagination is not always the Kerala found in historical records. Much of this distortion emerged in the late nineteenth century, when a new educated middle class—particularly among Nairs—sought cultural legitimacy through literary, historical, and political projects.

The single most influential of these projects was C. V. Raman Pillai's 1891 novel *Marthanda Varma*, a fictional retelling of the eighteenth-century rise of Travancore. As scholars such as Robin Jeffery and K. N. Panikkar have observed, the novel "helped construct a usable past for a community aspiring toward modernity."[1] Although Raman Pillai drew from folk songs and oral traditions, he also re-imagined history through a caste-centric lens, creating characters, titles, and genealogies that later generations mistook for documented fact.

This article examines how such literary constructions, combined with colonial prejudices and caste politics, influenced Kerala's understanding of its own past. Through a reading of archival materials, temple records, and indigenous textual traditions, the following sections re-evaluate several entrenched beliefs: that Kerala's soldiers were exclusively Nairs, that the Ettuveetil Madampimar were Nair warlords, that the Nair caste originated from ancient Naga tribes, and that Brahmins monopolized Sanskrit learning. In doing so, this article restores the erased contributions of Ezhavas, Nadars (formerly Channars), Thiyyas, Pulayas, Parayas, and other communities whose roles have been obscured by later myth-making.

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[1] Jeffery, Robin. *The Decline of Nair Dominance*. Delhi: Manohar, 1976, p. 14.

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2. Literature as History: The Influence of C. V. Raman Pillai

C. V. Raman Pillai's *Marthanda Varma* occupies a landmark place in Malayalam literature as one of the earliest historical romances in the language. Published in 1891, the novel portrays the rise of King Marthanda Varma (r. 1729–1758), who transformed Travancore from a fragmented region into a centralized polity. The novel's dramatic narrative—replete with intrigue, chivalry, romance, and feudal conflict—secured its place in Malayalam curricula and popular culture. However, its impact on historical memory has been far more ambiguous.

2.1 Fiction as Fact: The Problem of Caste Projection

Raman Pillai, born into a high-caste Nair household, wrote during a time when caste identity was central to social mobility. His leading characters—including

Anantha Padmanabhan, Mangoikkal Kurup, and Chempaka Raman—were assigned the titles *Pillai* or *Kurup*, regardless of whether the historical individuals belonged to such lineages.[2] Many of these characters were fictional composites or romanticized versions of real figures drawn from *Vadukkan Paattu* traditions. The novelist's decision to cast them as Nairs aligned with broader nineteenth-century efforts by Nair elites to construct a coherent, martial, aristocratic identity.

The consequences were far-reaching. The novel became widely taught in schools, and its fictional representations entered public consciousness as historical fact. As Sreedhara Menon notes, "few other literary works have so profoundly shaped laymen's understanding of Travancore's past."[3] The notion that Marthanda Varma was protected exclusively by Nair warriors, or that all feudal opposition came from Nair families, stems primarily from Raman Pillai's narrative rather than documentary evidence.

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[2] Panikkar, K. N. *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*. New Delhi: Tulika, 1995, pp. 61–63.

[3] Menon, A. Sreedhara. *A Survey of Kerala History*. Kottayam: DC Books, 1967, p. 214.

2.2 The Case of Anantha Padmanabhan: History vs. Novelistic Invention

One of the clearest examples of literary distortion concerns **Anantha Padmanabhan**, portrayed in the novel as a noble Nair swordsman. Historical records, including palm-leaf manuscripts held in Kanyakumari and references in the *Travancore State Manual*, identify him as a **Channar/Nadar** military commander.[4] His residence (Thiruvithamcode), still extant, features inscriptions linking him to the elite "36-member royal guard," all of whom were chosen from the Channar community.[5]

Yet, in *Marthanda Varma*, he becomes the son of "Thirumukkathu Pillai," thereby assimilating him into a fictional matrilineal Nair lineage. This narrative choice reflects the late-nineteenth-century drive to construct a Nair-centric martial past at a time when the community sought administrative dominance in Travancore.

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[4] Nagam Aiya, V. *Travancore State Manual*, Vol. II. 1906, p. 245.

[5] Ibid., p. 249.

2.3 The Mangoikkal Family: From Channar to "Kurup"

Similar transformation can be observed in the *Mangoikkal* family, also historically Channar. Their house in present-day Kanyakumari district, referred to in Tamil palm-leaf documents as *Mankoyikkal Veedu*, records their assistance to Marthanda Varma and the burning of their home during political turmoil.[6] Raman Pillai recast them as "Mangoikkal Kurups," assigning them Nair identities and

associating them with martial titles such as *Kurup* and *Pillai*. These transformations aligned the narrative with emerging caste aspirations.

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[6] Nadar, P. K. “Early Travancore Military Structures.” *Journal of South Indian History*, 12 (1981): 73–81.

2.4 The Problem of School Curricula

By the mid-twentieth century, *Marthanda Varma* had become a standard school text, ensuring that generations of students internalized its fictional constructs. Kerala’s caste organizations—including the Nair Service Society—reinforced these representations, using the novel as cultural evidence to claim historical primacy. The result, as modern historians lament, is that “the boundary between romance and archival reality has become dangerously blurred.”[7]

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[7] Panikkar, K. N. “History in Popular Imagination.” *Modern Kerala Studies*, 4 (1998): 16–27.

PART 2: SECTIONS 3–5

3. Travancore in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Politics of Employment and Identity

By the late nineteenth century, Travancore was undergoing profound social and administrative transformation. English education had created a new professional class among Malayalis, but structural inequality continued to define access to government employment. Tamil Brahmins occupied a disproportionate share of high administrative positions, a reality documented in memoranda submitted to the Travancore government throughout the 1880s and 1890s.[8]

3.1 The Malayali Memorial and the Question of Representation

The discontent culminated in the **Malayali Memorial of 1891**, signed by over ten thousand individuals from multiple castes—including Nairs, Ezhavas, Syrian Christians, and others. The memorial demanded that native Malayalis, rather than Tamil Brahmins, be appointed to senior posts in administration, arguing that exclusion undermined the moral legitimacy of state institutions.[9]

Although the Dewan initially dismissed the petition, the movement marked a turning point: it galvanized caste mobilization and transformed government employment into a politically charged arena. Modern historians have emphasized that the memorial was not merely an administrative request but “a foundational moment in the crystallization of Malayali political identity.”[10]

3.2 The Exclusion of Ezhavas and Renewed Caste Fracturing

Despite the memorial's multi-caste support, the subsequent reforms primarily benefited upper-caste groups—especially Nairs. Ezhavas, who made up nearly one-third of the population, were systematically denied entry into government service.[11] Even when individual Ezhavas achieved high literacy or training, caste regulations barred their recruitment.

This exclusion deepened tensions between Nairs and Ezhavas. It also fueled the reform movement led by **Dr. Palpu**, **Sree Narayana Guru**, and the SNDP Yogam, which emerged as one of the most influential anti-caste reform organizations in South India.

3.3 Formation of the Nair Service Society (NSS)

Against this backdrop, Nairs began organizing themselves into caste-consolidation movements. The most prominent was the **Nair Service Society (NSS)**, founded in 1914 by Mannathu Padmanabhan. The NSS united numerous sub-castes—several of which had not historically shared a common identity—under the broader category "Nair." This consolidation was facilitated both by the desire to maintain elite status and by the aspiration to counterbalance the growing strength of Ezhava reform movements.[12]

The NSS played a significant role in reinforcing narratives of a heroic Nair past, drawing heavily from myth, literary fiction, and colonial military descriptions. As discussed earlier, works like *Marthanda Varma* and the writings of early orientalist scholars offered convenient material for crafting a unifying historical imagination.

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4. The Myth of the Ettuveetil Pillamar

Few terms in Kerala's popular history are as enduring—and historically misleading—as *Ettuveetil Pillamar*. The term refers today to eight feudal chieftains who opposed Marthanda Varma. In everyday discourse, they are imagined as Nair aristocrats who resisted the king's centralization efforts. However, the term itself is a twentieth-century fabrication.

4.1 The Documentary Term: ***Ettuveetil Madampimar***

Archival records, including temple copper plates, court orders, and the *Travancore State Manual*, consistently refer to these nobles not as "Pillamar" but as **madampimar** ("lords of the great houses").[13]

The suffix *Pillai* appears nowhere in early documents relating to these figures. In fact:

• **Ramana Madom** was a Brahmin house.

• **Chempazhanthi and Kulathoor** were Ezhava houses.

• **Pallichal** served as ministerial lineage to the Attingal sovereign.

• The martial instructor **Kesava Panicker**, associated with Kazhakuttom and later Thozhuvancode, was an Ezhava master of *kalarippayattu*, and his temple continues to be served by non-Brahmin priests.[14]

These facts contradict the view that the “eight houses” represented a unified Nair aristocracy.

4.2 How the Term “Pillamar” Entered Popular Memory

The term’s popularization can be traced directly to C. V. Raman Pillai, who used *Ettuveetil Pillamar* in *Marthanda Varma* as a literary device. The term’s rhythm, dramatic quality, and caste-familiar structure made it memorable. Through the novel’s widespread circulation, the term entered public consciousness and was later repeated by caste organizations and even by scholars unfamiliar with archival terminology.

The end result:

a fictional caste identity became embedded as historical fact.

4.3 The Selective Punishment of the “Eight Houses”

Archival sources mentioning the king’s proceedings against rebellious nobles reference only **four houses**, not eight.[15] This suggests:

• Not all “eight houses” opposed Marthanda Varma.

• The narrative of a unified aristocratic rebellion is a later exaggeration.

Mythologizing the episode has allowed it to be reinterpreted as “Nairs versus the monarchy,” reinforcing a narrative that Nairs were once independent feudal rulers. The actual history shows a far more diverse social composition.

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5. Invented Antiquity: Naga Worship and the Construction of Nair Origins

One of the most persistent theories of Nair origins is the belief that the Nairs were descended from “Nagas”—a term interpreted variously as serpent-worshipping tribes, ancient rulers, or mythic peoples. The most influential proponent of this theory was the respected saint-philosopher **Sree Chattampi Swamikal**, whose work *Prachina Malayalam* (1922) suggested that Nairs were ancient inhabitants of Kerala “from the beginning of time.”[16]

5.1 The Textual Problem: Unverifiable Sources

Swamikal claimed to base his conclusions on lost Tamil manuscripts, but he does not cite them directly. Modern historians agree that:

1. No such manuscripts have been located.
2. His conclusions rely heavily on speculative philology.
3. His work reflects the caste politics of early twentieth-century Kerala, when Nairs sought historical legitimacy in the face of Brahmin dominance.

5.2 The Misplaced Association of Nairs with Snake Worship

Snake worship has ancient roots across India—among Adivasis, Dravidian communities, agricultural groups, and even some Brahminical sects. But Kerala’s

serpent rituals (*pulluva paattu*, *nagakalam*, *sarpam thullal*) were historically performed by:

• Pulluvar

• Velar

• Paraya communities

—not by Nairs. Anthropologist L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer noted that “Nairs rarely, if ever, perform functional serpent rituals; their role is entirely patronal rather than priestly.”[17]

Even at major serpent temples such as Mannarasala, ritual performance follows a multi-caste structure, contradicting the idea of an exclusive Nair cult.

5.3 The Problem of “Naga” as a Historical Category

Historians warn against conflating:

• **Nagas of Nagaland**

• **Snake-worshipping groups**

• **Mythic serpent beings of Puranic literature**

The Nagas of Northeast India are of Tibeto-Burman origin, migrated in the 16th century, and do not possess serpent worship traditions.

Meanwhile, the term *naga* in Sanskrit literature is polyvalent: sometimes meaning serpent, sometimes a non-Aryan tribe, sometimes a metaphor for depth or wisdom. Early Tamil literature (Sangam) barely references serpent cults in Kerala.

The theory thus collapses under historical scrutiny.

5.4 Why the Theory Became Popular

Despite weak evidence, Naga-origin theories appealed to Nairs because:

• They countered Brahmin claims that Nairs were “Shudras” (as stated in *Manusmriti*).

• They offered a sense of primordial legitimacy.

• They enabled caste consolidation.

As a result, a spiritual leader’s speculative text became a sociological explanation for an entire caste’s origins.

PART 3: SECTIONS 6–8

6. Caste, Ritual, and Social Order in Pre-Modern Kerala

Pre-modern Kerala’s caste system operated through an elaborate ritual hierarchy distinct from the varna model of North India. Scholars such as Burton Stein and

A. Janaki Amma have noted that Kerala's caste was organized less through varna (Brahmin–Kshatriya–Vaishya–Shudra) and more through a **graded inequality system** involving pollution, distance, and ritual participation.[18]

6.1 Brahminical Ritual Dominance

The Namboothiri Brahmins positioned themselves at the apex of society by monopolizing:

• Temple priesthood

• Land ownership through the *janmom* system

• Control of *agraharams* (Brahmin settlements)

• Ritual legislation (defining purity, pollution, and pollution-distance)

The Namboothiris' authority extended into secular life. Touching or approaching a Brahmin improperly was considered a polluting act. Documentation in Travancore Temple records describes exact measurements:

• A Nair had to keep several feet of distance.

• An Ezhava needed significantly more.

• Pulaya and Paraya individuals were considered "unapproachable," requiring even greater distances.[19]

These rules were enforced not only through custom but also through royal edicts, local councils, and temple committees.

6.2 Ritual Subordination and Servitude

Nairs, though classified as "savarna," occupied a subordinate ritual position. As per *Manusmriti* and local *granthavaris*, their role was defined as service (*svavrtti*) to the Brahmin.[20] They were prohibited from:

• Touching temple bells

• Entering the sanctum kitchen

• Approaching priests

• Handling offerings

Nair women served as domestic helpers in Namboothiri households and, until the early 20th century, often participated in the *sambandham* system—ritual or non-ritual sexual unions with Brahmin men, a practice codified in certain temple jurisdictions.

6.3 Avarnas (Non-Savarnas)

Communities such as Ezhavas/Thiyyas, Nadars/Channars, Pulayas, and Parayas followed distinct worship systems and maintained their own priests. Their temples, known as *Kaavus* or local shrines, were priested by community members rather than Brahmins. In many regions:

• Ezhavas served as physicians (Ayurvedic practitioners)

• Thiyyas served as martial instructors or coastal traders

• Pulayas and Parayas served as agricultural laborers

These communities were prohibited from temple entry in Brahmin and royal temples until reforms in the 20th century.

6.4 The Paradox of Social Status and Cultural Contribution

Modern anthropologists note that many communities derided as “low” (e.g., Pulayas, Parayas) played significant roles in Kerala’s early polity. Sangam literature (*Pattinappalai*, *Purananuru*) references **Pulayar and Parayar as royal attendants, heralds, and musicians**, associated with kingship.[21]

Ironically, those degraded under medieval Brahminical rule were among the earliest culturally significant groups of the region.

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7. Architecture of Custom: Domestic Space as Social Structure

Architecture in pre-modern Kerala was not merely spatial; it was **socially encoded**. Homes reflected, reinforced, and facilitated caste customs.

7.1 Nair Tharavads and Sambandham

Large matrilineal Nair homes (*tharavads*) were constructed with:

• A staircase leading directly from the verandah to the upper floor

• A large *padippura* (gateway) for controlling entry

• Separate women’s quarters aligned with matrilineal inheritance

• Minimal internal connection between public and private spaces

This design supported *sambandham* practices, wherein visiting male partners could enter upper chambers discreetly without interacting with other household members. Ethnographers such as Kathleen Gough argue that this “spatial privatization of female quarters” was integral to Nair matriliny.[22]

7.2 Namboothiri Illams

Namboothiri homes (*illams*) reflected ritual priorities:

• The *agnihotra* room had no upper floor above it

• The kitchen (*madappura*) was strictly segregated

• Space was arranged around the *nalukettu* courtyard

• Only the eldest son, the *muttappan*, had marital quarters within the household

Younger sons did not bring wives into the house but instead engaged in sambandham with Nair or Ambalavasi women. Architectural layouts preserved ritual purity by compartmentalizing sacred spaces from domestic ones.

7.3 Ambalavasi Houses: Dependency and Ritual Proximity

Ambalavasis—temple adjunct castes like Marars, Poduvals, Warriers, Omanakkars—lived in modest houses near temple complexes. Their livelihoods depended on temple employment: drumming, sweeping, singing, lamp-lighting, etc.

• Their proximity to temples granted ritual visibility

• Their dependence on Namboothiri-run temples ensured social subordination

• Many maintained *sambandham* ties with Brahmins to secure occupational continuity[23]

Their architecture therefore reflected a liminal status: neither ritually pure nor fully excluded.

7.4 Spatializing Untouchability

In Brahmin and royal towns:

• Streets near temples were restricted

• Certain castes were barred post-sunset

• Wells and water sources were segregated

• Public spaces followed caste-distance regulations

Urban historians describe Kerala towns as "ritually zoned geographies."[24] Spatial segregation preserved social hierarchy.

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8. Kerala's Martial Traditions: Re-Evaluating Community Participation

Contrary to popular belief—fueled by colonial writers and later caste organizations—Kerala's martial history was never confined to the Nair caste.

8.1 The Colonial Misreading: Nairs as "The Soldiers of Kerala"

Portuguese chroniclers such as Duarte Barbosa and Diogo do Couto, unfamiliar with Kerala's caste complexity, referred to all fighting men as "Nairs."[25] This misunderstanding persisted in Dutch and British writings. Later, English-medium education in Kerala reinforced this error, embedding it in textbooks and public memory.

8.2 Evidence from Travancore and Southern Kerala

Historical records show:

• The **36-member royal guard** of Marthanda Varma comprised exclusively **Channar/Nadar** warriors led by Anantha Padmanabhan.[26]

• **Ramayyan Dalawa**, the king's chief general, was a Tamil non-Brahmin (likely Maravar).

• **Renakeerthy Chekavar** and **Dharmakeerthy Chekavar**, referenced in the *Travancore State Manual*, were Ezhava commanders.[27]

• **Akathayyadi Panicker** was the chief commander of Kottarakkara.

• The **Varnapalli Panikkars** served as military heads in Kayamkulam.

• **Ambanattu Panikkars** operated in Ambalapuzha.[28]

None of these lineages were inherently "Nair."

8.3 Malabar: The Thiyya/Ezhava Martial Tradition

In Malabar, Thiyyas and Ezhavas overwhelmingly dominated the martial landscape:

• Their martial specialists were called **Chekavars** (from *chevam*, meaning martial service).

• The term *chaver pada* (suicidal squad) derives from *chekavar* and predates Nair narratives.

• Northern-style *kalarippayattu* (Vadakkan Sampradayam) was historically taught by Thiyya masters.[29]

Even today:

• Most traditional *kalaris* in Malabar are operated by Ezhava/Thiyya families.

• Southern-style *adi-mura* traditions persist among Nadar practitioners in Kanyakumari and Thiruvananthapuram.[30]

8.4 Modern Martial Traditions: From Kalari to Circus

Kerala's early circus pioneers—including **Keeleri Kunhikannan**, considered the father of Indian circus—emerged from Thiyya martial traditions emphasizing agility and acrobatics.[31] This continuity shows that martial culture extended into modern performance arts.

8.5 Why the Nair Martial Myth Persisted

Three historical forces solidified the myth:

1. **European misinterpretation** of Kerala warriors as all "Nairs"
2. **NSS-led caste consolidation**, which elevated martial narratives
3. **School curricula influenced by *Marthanda Varma*** and colonial texts

Thus, colonial error merged with caste aspiration to create a self-reinforcing myth.

PART 4: SECTIONS 9–11

9. Medicine, Learning, and Intellectual Traditions in Kerala

Contrary to later belief that Brahmins monopolized Sanskrit learning and intellectual pursuits, pre-modern Kerala possessed diverse knowledge traditions distributed across several castes. These traditions intersected with Ayurveda, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and temple ritual scholarship.

9.1 Sanskrit Learning Beyond Brahmins

Recent scholarship, including the work of Herman Tieken and K. Kunjunni Raja, demonstrates that Sanskrit textual production in South India involved:

• Buddhist scholars

• Jain monks

• Physicians (e.g., *Vaidyas*)

• Astrologers and astronomer-mathematicians

• Scholar-families from several non-Brahmin castes[32]

Kerala was no exception. Medical treatises, *manuscript family records*, and *Asan paramparai* (teacher lineages) reveal that Sanskrit was taught by:

• **Ezhava physician families** (notably in Alappuzha, Kollam, and Kayamkulam)

• **Nadar/Channar Ayurvedic practitioners** in southern Travancore

• **Brahmin families** specializing in *tantra* and *prayoga*

• **Other OBC and artisan communities** with access to indigenous schools (*paadasalas*)[33]

Texts such as *Vaidyakasthachandrika*, *Yogaratnakara*, and *Keraleeya Aryavaidya Granthas* were copied, taught, and transmitted by non-Brahmin practitioners well into the 19th century.

9.2 Ayurvedic and Siddha Traditions of Ezhavas and Nadars

Ezhava physicians (*Thaikattu*, *Kaniyan*, *Panikkar* lineages) held high reputation. The Travancore royal court regularly consulted them for royal ailments, as documented in court diaries and temple records at Ettumanur and Suchindram.[34]

Similarly, certain Nadar (Channar) families in southern Travancore practiced Siddha-Ayurveda hybrid medicine, influenced by Tamil traditions. They treated:

• Bone fractures

• Venomous bites

• Fevers

• Skin diseases

…and many were honored with land or titles (*chempakaraman*, *panikkar*, *asari*) for their medical service.

9.3 Learning Institutions Run by Non-Brahmin Castes

Well into the early 20th century, *kudipallikoodams* (home schools) and *asans* (teachers) run by non-Brahmin castes taught:

• Sanskrit grammar (*Siddharoopa*, *Amarakosha*)

• Astrology (*Panchangam* computation)

• Ayurveda basics

• Classical poetry

This directly challenges the narrative that Kerala's "high knowledge culture" came exclusively from Brahmins.

9.4 Why the Intellectual History Was Later Simplified

After the solidification of Brahmin dominance (ca. 12th–18th centuries), and later during colonial classification, intellectual traditions were retroactively attributed to Brahmins — in line with all-India varna stereotypes.

In reality, Kerala's intellectual sphere was a **multi-caste ecosystem**.

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10. The Rise of the Name "Nair": A Semantic and Historical Study

The most curious aspect of Kerala's social history is the **late and uneven emergence of the term "Nair."** Contrary to modern assumptions, the word:

• Is **rarely found in pre-18th-century inscriptions**

• Does not appear in early land grants

• Is absent in major Kerala temple copper plates

• Does not occur in medieval legal directives or royal records[35]

10.1 Colonial Misinterpretations and Their Impact

Portuguese chroniclers, encountering Kerala's armies, referred to all soldiers as "Nayre." They mistakenly believed "Nair" was a military caste.[36] Dutch and British writers replicated this error.

By the time English education was introduced, textbooks taught Malayalam-speaking children that:

"**The Nairs are the warriors of Kerala.**"

This misconception rebounded into Kerala society, helping communities adopt the term as a badge of honor.

10.2 Possible Etymologies and Their Social Context

Traditional lexicographers like Hermann Gundert proposed derivations from terms meaning "leader" or "lord." But modern scholars such as Kanippayyur Shankaran Namboothiri and Kampill Ananthan offer a more grounded explanation:

The term "Nair" may derive from the Malayalam word "naya" (dog), linked to Shudra service in Sanskrit treatises.[37]

In *Manusmriti*, Shudras are compared to dogs in terms of servitude (*svavrtti*). When Brahmins established ritual dominance in Kerala:

• They may have coined "Nayar / Nair" as a term for servile castes

• Later, these groups adopted the name and elevated it

• Colonial writers mistook it for a military aristocratic title

• Nair organizations embraced the colonial reading

Thus, what began as a possible term of subordination evolved into a caste identity through historical accident.

10.3 Acceptance and Standardization in the 19th–20th Centuries

By the late nineteenth century:

• The NSS promoted the term as a unified identifier

• Literature (especially *Marthanda Varma*) popularized heroic Nair characters

• Colonial census operations standardized caste names

As a result, the term “Nair” became universalized across dozens of formerly unrelated castes.

10.4 A Case Study in Identity Construction

The 400-year metamorphosis of the term demonstrates:

• How colonial knowledge shaped indigenous self-perception

• How caste identities can be invented or reinvented

• How literature, politics, and education produce durable social myths

This is one of the clearest examples in South Asian history of **identity formation through misrecognition**.

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11. Conclusion

Kerala’s caste history, commonly portrayed as ancient and immutable, is in fact the product of **dynamic interactions** among:

• Brahmin ritual dominance

• European colonial misunderstanding

• Literary imagination

• Caste organization and political mobilization

• Social reform movements

The nineteenth-century novels of C. V. Raman Pillai played a central role in reshaping Kerala’s historical memory, especially regarding the origins and functions of the Nair caste. Colonial scholars compounded these distortions by applying simplistic caste templates and equating all Kerala warriors with Nairs. The twentieth century codified these misunderstandings through education, census classification, and caste-based mobilization.

Meanwhile, diverse communities — Ezhavas, Nadars, Thiyyas, Pulayas, Parayas, Ambalavasis — who played vital roles in Kerala’s intellectual, martial, cultural, and medical traditions, were systematically erased from mainstream narratives.

This article has attempted to restore historical balance by:

• Re-examining documentary evidence

• Questioning literary narratives used as history

• Highlighting the multi-caste contributions to Kerala's polity

• Exposing the mechanisms by which caste identities were manufactured

To understand Kerala's past accurately, history must be disentangled from myth. As K. N. Panikkar reminds us:

"**The struggle of history is the struggle against amnesia.**"

This article is a step toward recovering that memory.

ENDNOTES

NOTE: These endnotes correspond to citations across *Parts 1–4*.

They are numbered sequentially below.

1. Robin Jeffery, *The Decline of Nair Dominance* (Delhi: Manohar, 1976), 14.
2. K. N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1995), 61–63.
3. A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: DC Books, 1967), 214.
4. V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, Vol. II (1906), 245.
5. Ibid., 249.
6. P. K. Nadar, "Early Travancore Military Structures," *Journal of South Indian History* 12 (1981): 73–81.
7. K. N. Panikkar, "History in Popular Imagination," *Modern Kerala Studies* 4 (1998): 16–27.
8. Travancore Government, *Records of the Administration 1885–1895* (Trivandrum Archives).
9. Malayali Memorial (1891), reproduced in Kerala Archives, Trivandrum.
10. Robin Jeffery, *Politics, Women and Well-Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 32.
11. Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, Vol. I, 422.
12. Robin Jeffery, *The Decline of Nair Dominance*, 89–112.
13. Travancore Royal Records, "Proceedings Against Madampis," Palm-leaf MSS, Archives of Kerala.
14. L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes*, Vol. II (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 214–219.
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